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Soviet Theater Forces in 1991: The Impact of the Unilateral Withdrawals on Structure and Capabilities

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Information available as of 22 November 1989 was used in the preparation of this Memorandum, which was prepared by the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces. The Memorandum was coordinated throughout the Intelligence Community by the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces.

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Key Judgments

Implementation of the two-year program of unilateral troop reductions announced by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1988 appears to be roughly on schedule. To date, the Soviets have withdrawn almost 2,000 tanks from the German Democratic Republic; however, reorganization and modernization in the Western Group of Forces (WGF) will partially offset the resulting reduction in force capabilities.

At the end of 1990, the WGF will consist of five armies and 15 divisions (seven tank and eight motorized rifle). It appears that the divisions will consist of four maneuver regiments: tank divisions will have two tank and two motorized rifle regiments, while motorized rifle divisions will have four motorized rifle regiments. Regiments apparently will not have combined arms battalions. It is not yet clear whether motorized rifle regiments in tank divisions will have two or three motorized rifle battalions (along with one tank battalion).

Complete reorganization of units in the WGF will require the Soviets to introduce approximately 1,800 armored troop carriers (ATCs), 400 artillery pieces (122 mm and 152 mm) and 200 antitank guns. Only about 450 ATCs, about 100 artillery pieces, and about 100 antitank guns have been introduced. Therefore, although the reorganization could be completed by the end of 1990, the current pace of equipment introduction would need to be increased significantly.

The restructuring of WGF tank and motorized rifle divisions will result in greater changes in their capabilities than are apparent from the changes in their aggregate combat potential scores. The divisions—and the WGF—will have substantially less armored striking power. Moreover, the new division organization makes it more difficult to concentrate tank forces.

Manpower reductions, coupled with the requirements of the reorganization, will not allow division-level readiness to be increased in the foreseeable future. Divisions will probably continue to be manned at about 85-percent strength.

The unilateral air reductions and restructuring will, when completed, result in a Soviet aircraft mix weighted toward air-to-air fighters over ground attack aircraft in East Germany. The aircraft force mix in the Western Theater of Military Operations as a whole, however, will be weighted more heavily than before toward ground attack aircraft. The number of deep attack aircraft remains unchanged. Although this new force structure will be more capable of defending against a surprise NATO air offensive, it will not further impair the Soviets' ability to conduct offensive air operations.

The unilateral reductions are consistent with the announced Soviet shift toward a more defensive doctrine. Pursuant to the new doctrine's "War Prevention" tenet, the reductions will virtually eliminate the Soviets' already limited short warning attack capability. By lengthening Soviet timelines to transition to war, the reductions increase the prospects for successful crisis management.

We believe the General Staff would have mid-to-high-level confidence in its ability to prosecute deep offensive operations against NATO forces in the Central Region, given sufficient time for force generation. However, the need to draw substantially on forces in the western USSR would severely constrain Soviet options in a multitheater war.

~~*This information is Secret*~~